

## Publishers

I have been reading *Book Business* by Jason Epstein [1]. It is wonderful stuff. It reminds me of why I really love publishers. Epstein started working for Doubleday as a dreamy, literature-loving college graduate in 1950. When he was twenty-two, he founded Anchor Books in order to make available inexpensive quality paperback editions of the great works of literature that he loved but could not afford on his \$45-a-week salary. Later on, he started *The New York Review of Books* to provide a more provocative national forum for literary reviewing. Perhaps his crowning achievement was the magnificent Library of America series. He has some very cogent things to say about what is happening to the publishing industry as things move to electronics, but the book also provides a bracing tonic against the one-sided view of publishers that we, as librarians, so often fall into.

We are fond of demonizing publishers, particularly the "commercial" publishers, the for-profits who gleefully, meanly, unethically, and evilly take unfair advantage of our weak and vulnerable library budgets to wrest "obscene" profits from our defenseless hands. We love to speak self-righteously of their "greed."

All publishers are not Elsevier. (Actually, even Elsevier is hardly Elsevier any more, but that is for a different discussion on the conglomeratization of international publishing—see Carolyn Lipscomb's column in this issue). Even Elsevier is not "greedy"—Elsevier is just extremely successful and has been for centuries. They know what they are doing.

It does not help us when we make it personal. Face it, a commercial publisher is duty bound to make as much money as it can. That is the way capitalism works.

An "obscene" profit is one in which the company fails to make the biggest return possible on its investment dollar. The top executives who lose their jobs are the ones who leave money on the table—not the ones who successfully operate at a higher profit margin than anyone else.

It has always puzzled me when someone says that so-and-so's subscription price is "outrageous," right before authorizing payment. Quite frankly, from a market economy standpoint, as long as you are paying the invoice, it would be outrageous for the company to charge less. You may not *like* paying it, and you may wish they would give you the stuff at cost or less, but it seems to me rather obtuse to accuse them of crass and evil motives for acting the way that our modern economy demands that companies act.

At the symposium on electronic publishing at MLA/CHLA/ABSC 2000, last year's MLA annual meeting, David Shulenburg, Ph.D., provost of the University of Kansas, presented a wealth of data showing that, while our financial dilemma is worse with regard to the for-profit publishers, the financial practices of the not-for-profit and society publishers are not much better. There is something more basic at work in the publishing business than greedy philistines playing barely within the bounds of legality to coerce every last dime from us.

Which is not to say that we do not have a problem. We most certainly do. Pat Schroeder, former congressional representative and now executive director of the Association of American Publishers, is very clear about the dangers that she feels libraries represent. She is smart, is well respected on Capitol Hill, and has a long and worthy reputation for fighting tenaciously

for the things she believes in. Also, she appears to believe that libraries and our exploitation of Fair Use and the special library provisions of the copyright law represent a threat to the livelihood of the people that she now represents [2].

It is important to understand your opponents. Putting a devil's mask on Schroeder and the people who run the big publishing houses is not going to help us address the real problem, although I suppose it is useful for letting off steam. It is critical that we keep in mind that many publishers, particularly in the book business—those people who made it possible for Faulkner, Joyce, Pynchon, and you name it to find readers (often through libraries, of course)—are having a great deal of difficulty making the transition to this new economy. Remember that Elsevier is the *exception* in terms of its financial success. Most publishers operate at a very thin margin, and, with the corporatization of publishing and now the impacts of electronic information, many in the business are seeing those margins get even thinner. Remember that after a hard day of complaining about the prices you pay for things in your library and wishing that the "middlemen" would all be consigned to the eighth order of hell, when you finally settle down after dinner for an hour reading some absolutely scrumptious novel, you have a publisher to thank for putting it in your hands—a publisher who is most likely running scared. When we make all publishers the bad guys because of our ire at Elsevier and the other big commercial publishers, we play right into the hands of our opponents and risk alienating the people who really could be our natural allies.

However, I do not want to imply that appropriate sympathy for and

understanding of the pressures faced by the publishing industry should move us to accept our situation. The fact is, the information industry is undergoing revolutionary change, and some publishers are going to make it and some are not. I wish them all well, but my professional concerns are to serve the needs of my clientele and that means doing what I can to move and change the system to one that is more supportive of the needs of the people that we serve. If we are going to actually make a difference, we are going to have to change the system. We are going to have to work hard to understand how the publishing business really works, both in its traditional patterns and in the new ones that are developing and in all of its facets—authors, publishers, vendors, buyers, and readers. Until we can look with a cold, clear eye on the entire system and understand how it works, we cannot hope to shift it so that it works in ways that are more supportive of our issues and our agenda.

It is critical that we begin to appreciate the fact that this is not just an issue of the prices that publishers charge. Trying to pressure publishers into holding prices down is not likely to get us very far. The fact is, they cannot, not within the current system. The for-profits are compelled to charge what the market will bear, and the not-for-so-much-profits will trail along behind because the lure of revenue is too tempting. Librarians must understand that there is something much more fundamental (and, to be honest, much more fun) going on—a true revolution in scholarly publishing.

So consider the number of truly exciting things that are now going on in the world of scientific publishing. I do not mind admitting that I was skeptical the first time I saw a presentation on the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC). SPARC

claimed that they were going to change the way scholars shared information, that they were going to develop new ways for libraries to operate, and that they were going to change the economic model. Right. But nearly three years since its launch, they are in fact making a difference. In small but extremely significant steps, they are beginning to take scholarship back from the commercial publishers.

Are the commercial publishers scared yet? I sincerely doubt it. Reed Elsevier had revenues of \$1.1 billion from its science publishing unit last year. Harcourt took in \$700 million. And they are trying to merge [3]. The February–March issue of SPARC E-News reports that Elsevier's Science & Medical business is running a profit margin of 36% [4]. This, in an industry which has an average profit margin of 5% [5]. So SPARC's few successes are not rattling anybody's cages yet. But they may be the harbinger of the future nonetheless.

If you go to the SPARC home page,\* you will see a link to the Create Change site. Create Change is an initiative sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), and SPARC and is a wonderful resource for information about what is currently happening in publishing and what can be done about it. The most important thing about Create Change is that it recognizes that the key players in all of this are the university faculties. These people create the knowledge and use it in the form of papers published in journals. Librarians complaining to big publishers is a waste of energy. But librarians entering into alliances with faculty members and clinicians, educating them about what is going on, and helping them get the tools to change things—that has possibilities.

\* The SPARC home page may be viewed at <http://www.arl.org/sparc/home/>.

From the Create Change site, you will find links to the Declaring Independence initiative and the Public Library of Science. The initiators of the latter have an editorial in the March 23 issue of *Science* further emphasizing their view that “journal publishers, their editors, and all working scientists [should] join together to create public, electronic archives of the scientific literature, containing complete copies of all published scientific papers” [6]. The editors of *Science* offer a rebuttal in the same issue. They are not so sure, but maybe we are getting somewhere.

Think of it—when you studied the history of scientific publishing and heard about the early days of the *Philosophical Transactions*, didn't you feel a wistful *frisson* about what it must have been like to be around in those days? Wouldn't it have been wonderful to be able to play a part in the great scientific revolutions that were fed by the invention of moveable type and the whole publishing economy that it spawned?

This is where we are now. Our library descendants, a century or three hence, may look back on these days and what we do with the same kind of reverence, wistfulness, and awe. We have a chance to radically change the way that scholarly information moves through society. Every librarian has a part to play. Use the tools that Create Change provides to educate your clientele. Think carefully about your purchasing decisions. (Ken Frazier's recent article D-Lib Magazine is must reading for every librarian considering signing on to some of the major aggregated single-publisher journal collections [7].)

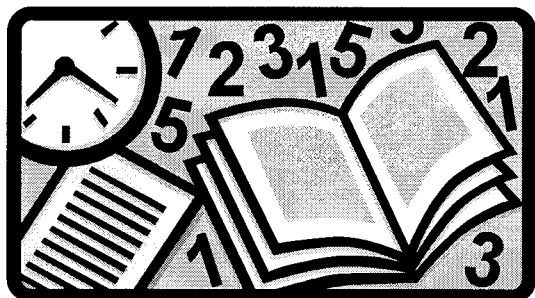
Epstein suggests that one impact of electronic publishing is that it may actually mark the return of publishing as a “cottage industry.” Perhaps, he thinks, the days of the mega-mergers are over, and the technology will allow publishing to return to the days when publishing

was "best performed by small groups of like-minded people, devoted to their craft, jealous of their autonomy, sensitive to the needs of writers and to the diverse interests of readers" [8]. Perhaps we are beginning to see that kind of thing happening in scientific and medical publishing. But I note, with some delight, that Epstein is not taking any chances. When you look at the verso of his title page, you will notice that he kept the copyright.

*T. Scott Plutchak, Editor  
University of Alabama at  
Birmingham*

## References

1. EPSTEIN J. Book business: publishing past present and future. New York, NY: Norton, 2001.
2. WEEKS L. Pat Schroeder's new chapter: the former congresswoman is battling for America's publishers. The Washington Post 2001 Feb 7:C01.
3. KIRKPATRICK DD. As publishers perish, libraries feel the pain. The New York Times 2000 Nov 3.
4. The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition. SPARC e-news. February–March 2001. [Web document]. Washington, DC: The Coalition. <<http://www.arl.org/sparc/core/index.asp?page=g16>>.
5. SHULENBURGER DE. Principles for a new system of publishing for science. [Web document]. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. <<http://www.ukans.edu/~provost/Papers/unesco3.htm>>.
6. ROBERTS RJ, VARMUS HE, ASHBURNER M, BROWN PO, EISEN MB, KHOSLA C, KIRSCHNER M, NUSSE R, SCOTT M, WOLD B. Building a "Genbank" of the published literature. Science 2001 Mar 23;291(5512):2318a.
7. FRAZIER K. The librarians' dilemma: contemplating the costs of the "big deal." D-Lib Magazine 2001 Mar;7(3) [Web document]. <<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march01/frazier/03frazier.html>>.
8. EPSTEIN, op. cit.



## Cut Your Search Time in Half with MLA BibKits

Our selective, annotated bibliographies of discrete subject areas in the health sciences literature compiled by subject experts include:

- BibKit #1 – Communication Sciences and Disorders
- BibKit #2 – A Guide to Information Resources in Respiratory Care
- BibKit #3 – Osteopathic Medicine
- BibKit #4 – Health Data on the Internet
- BibKit #6 – A Guide to Information Resources for Telemedicine
- BibKit #7 – Consumer Health—**A 2001 release with bookmarked disk!**
- BibKit #8 – Chiropractic
- BibKit #9 – Managed Care

These reasonably priced publications range from \$10.00 to \$45.00. Order an MLA BibKit today by calling 312.419.9094 x19 or download an order form at [www.mlanet.org/order/](http://www.mlanet.org/order/) and fax to 312.419.8950.

Go to [www.mlanet.org/publications/bibkits/](http://www.mlanet.org/publications/bibkits/) to view the tables of contents for each BibKit.

**MLA** MEDICAL LIBRARY  
ASSOCIATION  
*An association of health information professionals*